

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 February 2003

Union cancels Indonesian pilots' strike

The union covering pilots at the state-owned airline Garuda Indonesia canceled a strike set for February 11 after a last minute request from the government.

In return, the Minister of State Enterprises Laksamana Sukardi promised to discuss the pilot's pay issue with the company. The minister's promise is meaningless. Airline management has already said it will not increase the last pay offer. The 639 Garuda pilots, who are currently paid between \$US900 to \$US2,500 per month, are demanding wage increases of up to 300 percent.

Despite the company's hardened attitude, a Garuda Pilots Association spokesman said this week: "We prefer to settle this (dispute) through dialogue instead of a strike."

Garuda is Indonesia's only international airline, flying routes to Asia and Europe. It also covers 40 percent of domestic passenger traffic.

Indian railway workers oppose outsourcing

Rail workers picketed railway printing premises this week after a demonstration in Hyderabad, the Andhra Pradesh state capital. They were opposing state government moves to close the press and outsource printing services. Employees have demanded that the government drop the plan and fill all existing vacant printing jobs.

The Joint General Council of Railway Trade Union Federations will meet with workers' representatives in Delhi next month to decide on future industrial action.

Power workers protest Ceylon Electricity Board carve-up

Sri Lankan power workers began a nationwide picketing campaign on February 6 against a government bill to breakup the state-owned Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) into seven regional electricity companies. The bill is due to be gazetted in April. Workers believe it is a step towards complete privatisation of the CEB.

Power workers also want payment of a salary increase owing since 2000, permanent jobs for 800 casual workers and an end to the contracting out of CEB work. Other demands include an end to political influence in determining promotions and the immediate promotion of workers who have the necessary qualifications.

While the main picket was held outside CEB head office in Central Colombo, hundreds of workers were involved in similar protests at Kandy, Galle, Trincomalee, Anuradhapura, Ampara, and Kuliypitiya and other major regional offices.

Sri Lankan postal workers win pay advance

Postal workers began picketing Gampaha Post Office on February 6 to demand a 1,000-rupee allowance (about \$US10) in order to purchase schoolbooks for their children. These advances are often made to help workers meet educational payments and other commitments.

The workers applied for the payment well before schools re-opened at the beginning of the year and fulfilled all the official requirements. But the advance had still not been paid a month after the school term commenced. Workers ended their protest on February 10, after finally receiving the salary advance.

Bangladeshi mill workers on hunger strike for back pay

More than 600 workers at the Rajshahi Textile Mills in Rajshahi City began a hunger strike on February 10 to demand payment of an eight-month salary arrears and the Eid-ul-Fitr festival (a Muslim religious event) bonus. Workers banging empty pots marched from the mill through the city to the central Shaheb Bazar Zero Point on February 9. Speakers at the rally also condemned the government for growing unemployment.

The non-payment of wages has caused severe hardships for Rajshahi mill workers and their families with one employee, Abdul Wahed, dying from a heart attack caused by stress over lack of income.

Workers began a hunger strike outside the mill on the Eid-ul-Fitr festive day but abandoned the action when Rajshahi City Mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu pledged to pay all outstanding salaries. The promise was not honoured.

Pakistan teachers demonstrate against salary cut

Members of the All Sindh Masjid School Teachers Association of Khairpur met on February 8 and decided to begin protests over salary cuts and the non-payment of wages. Khairpur is in Pakistan's Sindh province.

Teachers demonstrated in Khairpur city on February 10 and held a sit-down protest on the busy Thari-Setharja link road near the town's civic hospital. The teachers, who are often not paid, face salary cuts of between 300 and 400 rupees (\$5-7).

Victorian library workers threatened over industrial action

The State Library of Victoria has issued a staff circular threatening legal and disciplinary action against employees involved in a protest rally outside the Melbourne library on February 4, during a two-day strike over pay. The circular said: "Those who chose to participate are not immune from legal or disciplinary action if they are involved in restricting or obstructing free entry into the library."

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), which is seeking legal advice over the threats, has denied that the protestors had obstructed anyone from entering the building.

Staff at the state-run library are paid less than those employed by council, university and school libraries in Victoria. While a new degree-qualified librarian at the State Library earns \$A29,513, the starting salary at local council libraries is \$36,743.

State Library employees have rejected a three percent pay increase over three years offer by management. Work bans were put in place on February 7, after library staff returned to work last week.

SBS employees threaten strike action

About 40 Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) television news and current affairs staff in Sydney have threatened industrial action over a management decision to allow private sponsorship of some programs. SBS workers signed an open letter this week opposing the plan.

Unbeknown to staff, management amended editorial guidelines banning all sponsorship in December last year. Under the new arrangement, sponsorship can be obtained for “specialist information programs with some journalistic content”.

Workers became aware of the changes after news and current affairs management revealed that a sponsor was being sought for *The Business Show*. SBS employees fear that sponsorship will compromise editorial integrity.

SBS was established in 1991. While the government appoints the SBS Board of Directors, the SBS Act gives the broadcaster editorial independence. SBS television services attract 6.2 million viewers each week.

Queensland teachers campaign for smaller classes

Teachers in Queensland held a series of stopwork meetings this week to discuss a campaign for a new enterprise work agreement, including a demand for smaller class sizes. Meetings were held at South Port, McGreggor and Browns Plains state schools. Teachers at Sarina High School, near Mackay in North Queensland, voted to strike for a day and a half. Timing of the strike is still to be determined.

A growing number of teachers are leaving the profession because many have to teach classes of 30 to 35 students.

Plumbers and electricians continue industrial action in Queensland

Industrial action by plumbers and electricians for new enterprise work agreements is disrupting work on Queensland building sites. More than 300 plumbers on 30 construction sites in Brisbane went on strike for 48 hours on February 13. They want a 15 percent pay increase and a 36-hour week. More than 1,000 plumbers throughout Queensland are due to vote on further industrial action, including a weeklong strike.

Electricians have also held a series of strikes over the last month with 70 union members in Brisbane taking five-day strike action on February 13. They are campaigning for a \$2.64 per hour wage increase. Industrial action has affected the massive \$280 million Suncorp Stadium in Brisbane.

New Zealand doctors strike for pay

Senior doctors at Timaru Hospital staged a second six-hour strike on February 10, despite a new pay offer from the South Canterbury District Health Board (DHB). The doctors want salary increases to compensate for increasing workloads. They hope a pay rise will also attract new personnel and assist overcome chronic staff shortages.

According to the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS), the doctors are among the worst paid in the country and work under extremely poor conditions. Staff shortages and the absence of medical registrars force doctors into continuous weekend shifts. They are also required to be on call one night in every three.

The 30 doctors have already rejected a \$13,000 per annum pay offer from the DHB. An ASMS spokesman said the latest offer had arrived too late to avert the strike but the union was prepared to “consider it carefully”. The new offer, however, is not fundamentally different from the previous one.

Three further strikes are planned for February 19 and 27 and March 7. The walkouts are the first by senior medical staff in New Zealand’s history.

New Zealand metal workers rally in support of increased holidays

More than 300 engineering workers attended a rally in Auckland on February 13 to endorse a log-of-claims for a new work contract. A key claim is for an increase in the national annual leave provision from three weeks to four.

The Metals and Manufacturing Industries Agreement is the country’s largest private sector industrial agreement covering 2,000 workers in 200 different companies. The current agreement is due to expire next month. Negotiations between unions and the Employers and Manufacturers’ Association—representing 45 companies—began on the same day as the rally.

In addition to the extra weeks leave, the engineering union is seeking a five percent pay rise, improved bereavement and sick leave entitlements, and an increase in the minimum rate of pay. The Labour government has opposed any increase in annual leave, claiming it is “too expensive” for employers.

Fiji government cannery workers on poverty wages

Over 700 workers at Fiji’s state-owned Pacific Fishing Company tuna cannery in Levuka are involved in a long-running wage dispute with the government. The dispute went before the arbitration tribunal this week.

A representative for the workers told the tribunal they were living below the poverty line and “working in draconian conditions”. A submission by cannery workers said that pay had only increased from \$US 0.72 an hour in 1988 to \$US0.82 in 1998, with no increase since. Woman workers are paid five cents an hour less than their male counterparts.

While a Japanese company established the Pacific Fishing Company in 1964, it is now 99.5 percent owned by the Fiji government. After expanding its operations last year, the company now employs approximately half of Levuka’s 2,000-strong population.

While resisting workers claims for a 70 percent pay increase, the company is making solid profits. Last year it forecast annual earnings of \$US17.2 million.



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